

63.

## CHAPTER VI

THE last war of any importance, as I have stated, was that between Sharjah and Dubai in 1940. The cause of the war was a long-standing feud between the tribes of Bani Yas (Dubai) and Qasimi (Sharjah). There was also a dispute over territorial limits claimed by the sheikhs. The sheikhdom of Dubai is composed of two distinct districts; Dubai town proper, on the west of the creek, and Dera, on the north side. The largest and better-built houses, mostly inhabited by Indian and Persian merchants, as well as the more important shops of the pearl brokers, carpet sellers and goldsmiths, are situated in Dubai town. Here one finds cool, clean narrow streets with high walls, often overhung with Persian rugs to keep off the sun, and pleasant open shops where one may buy anything from a five hundred years' old Bokhara rug or a brass-bound Quaiti chest, to an American wrist-watch or a roll of bread. In the poorer section of Dera, where the fishermen and coolies live, there is a native bazaar and several long streets of shops, but these are dirty, dark and infested with flies. There one may buy items of gaudy Arab clothing, tobacco leaves, and dried food, including fish, spices, nuts, ghee butter, henna bark and rice. Some alleyways are devoted entirely to silversmiths and tinsmiths; the latter are clever craftsmen and can make almost any domestic utensil out of an empty petrol can. 721  
619  
361  
443

For several hundred years Dubai (which includes, besides the town, several villages and a tract of desert of about fifty square miles), has been ruled by the Al Bu Falaah branch of the Bani Yas clan, who are related to another Al Bu Falaah family, the sheikhs of Abu Dhabi (the 'Place of Gazelles'). Rivalry between the sheikhs of Dubai and their cousins in Dera, on the other side of the creek, may be traced back as far as 1850, when the Ak Bu Mahair family, their cousins, intrigued for ownership of the region. The Mahair were notorious pirates. A British gunboat had occasion to land a ship's crew at Dera to investigate an attack on a merchant ship in Dubai waters. Soon after the sailors from the gunboat had landed they were waylaid in a dark side street and murdered; as a 619  
622

## THE PIRATE COAST

107

chalcedony stone with a faded inscription, and had taken it to the silversmith to have it made into a ring; the purpose of his visit was to collect and pay for it, not always a simple matter in Arabia, where the merchant normally demands twice the legitimate price and expects to be beaten down. 437

Mahmud, who is a Baluchi and lives with his family in the poorer part of the town, took us through the less salubrious quarter. Sharjah has no city wall proper, but its place is taken by a ring of filthy hovels, the palm-thatched barousti huts of the coolies, slaves and servants. The stench from these slums is unbearable in hot weather, for each hut dweller uses his front door as a cesspool and a refuse dump, and the place is infested with flies and insects; native children crawl about in the sand, and mangy pai dogs snarl at one's approach. These miserable hovels afford protection against neither sun nor rain, and it is remarkable that their poverty-stricken inhabitants are not afflicted with disease. The quarter is a disgrace to Sharjah town and, although the Political Officer has remonstrated with the sheikh about it, he refuses to have the place rebuilt. 361 362

It was a pleasant relief to pass into the cool, dim alleys leading to the town; many of them are roofed with palm-thatch and are comparatively clean. The walls are honeycombed with doorways, leading to the houses of the tradesmen and metalsmiths. After a walk of fifteen minutes through the maze of dark, winding streets, during the progress of which we were conscious of hundreds of dark eyes staring curiously at us, we reached the sugar market. This is a large square in the centre of the town; it is roofed-in with huge strips of palm-matting, supported by whitewashed wooden pillars, making it very dim inside. 363 361 443 366

Tethered to the pillars were six camels, snarling and grumbling; occasionally they tried to rise, but their forefeet were tied together and they would hobble for a few yards and quickly fall back on their knees. They had brought bags of sugar from a boat in the harbour, and their owners were arguing over prices with the brokers. The market, which is about six hundred feet square, contains warehouses, brokers' offices and shops on each side. We should have liked to take a photograph of it, but as Sparkes had no time-exposure on his camera he decided not to risk wasting his film.

The colour and variety of dress one sees in a native bazaar is remarkable. The women are the least attractive, their trousers, wraps and veils being of an unrelieved black; it is their menfolk 291

501  
439

562  
751  
291

*On the coast any unveiled woman is usually either a Negress or a Baluchi. Even this little girl (fascinated by an aeroplane) would probably be veiled if an Arab. The locket around her neck contains scraps from the Koran to protect her from evil spirits.*



P.192 (C)



[Sharjah bazaar]  
THE SAND KINGS OF OMAN

291 who wear the finery. Their *abbas*, or ankle-length gowns, are of silk or linen, sometimes of a coarse, sackcloth material, but they are dyed in a variety of colours, from red and brown to purple, and those of the merchants are hemmed and embroidered with gold and silver thread. The head-dress is often of brightly-coloured silk, bound with an *aggal*, and the crescent-shaped sandals are invariably decorated with stencilled dyes or gold thread. The wealthier

301 classes are fond of displaying jewellery, and like to wear large pearl or diamond rings on their fingers; some wear ear-rings, giving them a piratical air, whilst others wear or carry amber necklaces, which they use for meditation and prayer as a Christian will use his rosary.

443 The shops in the bazaar are closed from midday to four o'clock,  
512 as the Arabs take a siesta after lunch—a custom bequeathed by their Moorish cousins to the Spaniards and observed in Spain to this day. This adjournment is not due to laziness, but is extremely practical, since the hottest time of the day occurs after twelve o'clock. At 4 p.m. the sun loses most of its heat and the streets are pleasantly cool. The shutters are then pulled down from the shop fronts, and the bazaar is thronged with gaily-dressed crowds of shoppers and sightseers.

443 The shops are merely open booths, or stalls, exposed to sand  
326 and flies, with the living quarters behind. As in China and  
467 mediæval Europe, some of the trades, such as those of the tinsmiths, silversmiths and leather merchants, are protected by guilds, and the members confine themselves to special parts of the town or bazaar. Thus in Sharjah there is a Street of Silversmiths, where these merchants exercise their craft to the exclusion of all other trades; Dubai similarly has a Street of Goldsmiths. These titles sound as though they had been taken from *Hassan* or the *Arabian Nights* and, indeed, the streets bear some resemblance to an Eastern stage setting.

443 The food shops are always interesting. The wares are displayed in little palm-weave panniers, and include cinnamon, nutmegs, ginger and spices, huge lumps of unrefined rock salt, dried peas and beans, attar flour, ghee butter, pea-nuts, curry powder, chicory and rice. Under the shop front hang rows of locally-grown tobacco leaves, strips of henna, and various kinds of salted, odorous dried fish. A variety of smells, pungent and aromatic, comes from these booths in the hot weather and can be detected from quite a distance.

The most colourful shops are those of the drapers, where the

[Sharjah bazaar]  
THE PIRATE COAST

109

products of Bombay and Birmingham—gaily-hued sarongs, shirts and scarfs—vie with cloths of native weave, and woollen cloaks washed, spun and woven in Dubai. Most of the drapers have a little haberdashery section, comprising pins, scissors, reels of cotton, tape and ribbons, in a glass case. 443

Foreign visitors usually find most delight in the carpet shops, where rugs from Ispahan, Sheraz, Kerman and Bushire lie in neat piles on the wooden floor; rugs of exquisite dyes and patterns may be obtained by those who are willing to pay the high prices demanded to-day—sometimes a hundred per cent higher than they were before the war. Really old and valuable carpets are rare and can usually be obtained only in Persia or India. There is, of course, the inevitable fake; a modern carpet designed in the seventeenth century style, which has lain in the streets of Teheran until the feet of goats, donkeys, camels and humans have worn it into the 'antique' texture.

A good modern carpet, of delightful colour, design, weave and nap, measuring about eight feet long by five feet wide, can be bought for sixty or a hundred rupees, according to the quality. For the poor man, there are machine-made rugs and carpets of traditional design, made in India, which cost from twenty rupees upwards. It is always advisable, however, to seek the advice of an expert when buying carpets in Arabia.

The 'mixed' general shop is usually worth a visit, for here one may find the wristlet watch or fountain pen which one lost in mysterious circumstances. Watches of good Swiss or American make are on sale at reasonable prices; my own 'Novoris', which came from Sharjah, cost only four pounds. Fountain pens, sun-glasses, rings and brooches, adorn the shelves side by side with Muscat daggers, canned goods and foreign cigarettes. Between every half-dozen booths is squeezed a café or coffee-shop, where the Arabs laze away the afternoon to discuss business or the affairs of the town. Nearly all business deals are talked over in the dark corners of a coffee-shop, where a wheezy portable gramophone screeches interminably the latest Arab love-songs, most of them discreetly pornographic. 265 517

I liked best to stand outside the bakers' booths and watch them make bread or rice-cakes. The dough would be kneaded and pummelled into shape in a bowl-shaped depression on a stone slab. When judged to be of the right consistency, it would be placed on a long-handled ladle, the blade of which is latticed like 252

## [Sharjah bazaar]

110

## THE SAND KINGS OF OMAN

252 a grid-iron, and placed directly on the glowing embers of the oven. Baked in this manner, the flat loaves of unleavened bread were crisp and brown in a few minutes, and tasted delicious. Arab children would crowd round the bakers' shop in little groups, fascinated by the dexterity with which the baker tossed the dough into the air with the ladle before consigning it to the fire.

326 In the quarter of the town where the tinsmiths and ironsmiths plied their trades, one could always be sure of finding something of interest. Here the shops of the blacksmiths exhibit all their primitive skill. A sheep's or pig's bladder is used as a bellows, and the fire, anvil and the blacksmith are all contained in a deep pit. Tools, nails, wrought-iron ornaments and domestic utensils are made in this crude manner from long iron bars, or 'scrap', [415] which is imported from India. The tinsmiths are equally dexterous in the manufacture of pots, pans, kettles and bowls, the basic material for which is provided out of old R.A.F. petrol cans. Some of the tin bowls are extremely decorative, being washed in copper and engraved with a hand-beaten design.

As we strolled away from the bazaar we encountered Hassan bin Ahmidfa, the young pearl merchant; he proved to be an excellent guide and companion, having a good sense of humour. He conducted us through a maze of alleyways until we came to the Street of Silversmiths, where wrinkled old men sat cross-legged, making their trinkets. Hossein, a white-haired smith with a beard and blue eyes, squatted over a hole in the ground filled with glowing charcoal. He kept this at the right temperature by means of a small sheepskin bellows. The silver he uses is made from rupee coins, which he melts down and then beats into thin wire.

306 He produced a tray full of semi-precious stones—agate, jade, chalcedony and jasper, some carved with Arabic inscriptions—which he uses as ring-settings. The stone Sparkes had chosen was a fine oval chalcedony with the words 'Mohammed bin Ali' engraved in old script. The setting consisted of a central hoop of thick silver, with two loops of twisted silver wire, hinged on either side. It looked barbaric, and the silver was rough and unpolished, but it made an effective ornament. I gave an order for a similar ring, to present to my wife, the cost being agreed, after some haggling, at five rupees.

294 Returning to the bazaar, we passed the tailors' shops, where  
 443 men sat cross-legged on little wooden stools, sewing by hand or by machine, and I was reminded of the cobbler's scene in *Chu Chin*

[Sharjah bazaar]  
THE PIRATE COAST

III

Chow. These narrow, twisting streets have changed little in the last four or five centuries, and a similar scene must have presented itself to Haroun al Raschid as, disguised as a beggar, he crept through the dark thoroughfares of Baghdad. When I was in Sharjah I read that his palace had been excavated, but the Arabs with whom I discussed this interesting piece of archæology were not interested. They have a superstitious dislike of Haroun, and do not like to talk about the *Arabian Nights*, though I could never discover the reason for this. 294  
443

The tailors make up most of the Arab *abbas* and *kufieys* from imported cloth of Indian manufacture; before the war a great deal of woollen and cotton fabrics came from Manchester, but it will probably be some time before the English piece-goods market is extended to Arabia again. We examined their wares; Indian-made shirts imported from Karachi, soft, woollen Kashmir shawls with hand-embroidered designs of birds and flowers in glowing colours; rich silks, sarongs and turbans, and large bales of coloured cloth for Arab children.

The streets are always congested at this hour. Not only Arabs, but goats and donkeys, throng the narrow ways, so that one continually brushes shoulders with the crowd and cannot avoid its inescapable stench. The peasant women seem dirtier than the men; this is presumably because their black cotton garments do not show the dirt, and are therefore seldom washed. Many of the younger women walked about unveiled and, in spite of their belladonna-stained eyes and henna-red lips, some of them were astonishingly lovely. They gave us coquettish glances as we passed, but even the most amorously-inclined Westerner would lose his ardour if he inhaled the nauseating odour of their persons. 363  
515

Before we left Sharjah, Hassan suggested that we should take a cup of Turkish tea, so we sauntered into an open-air tea shop and sat on hard benches polished by much use. A handsome young Arab brought us tall, narrow glasses containing very sweet, warm tea, unclouded by milk; it was very aromatic and agreeable. The benches were arranged in a square, in the centre of which were stalls displaying cakes and sweetmeats, a large urn, and the inevitable gramophone. An old Arab sat smoking his hubble-bubble and changing the records; in return for this service he was supplied by the proprietor with free tea. The words of the songs, which Hassan translated for our benefit, were mostly concerned with the plaintive laments of unsuccessful lovers, suggesting that the crooner's 265  
533  
265

## THE RUB-AL-KHALI

145

361 coco-nut trees grow down to the shore on either side of the creek, on the southern side of which is a palm-mat 'summer palace' belonging to the Sheikh of Ras-al-Khaimah, now used to house a discarded wife. The town is divided by the creek into two sections—Dubai proper, where the merchants and wealthier classes live, and Dera, the fishermen's quarter. We made for the latter and moored alongside a primitive wooden jetty beside which large pearling dhows were undergoing a careen.

342 The streets of Dera are filthy in the extreme, the inhabitants living in hovels roofed with palm-matting supported by wooden joists. The only presentable house was the coral and mortar residence of Ali, the Anglo-Persian Company's agent in Dubai; we stopped here for a few minutes and had a cup of tea made with

438 condensed milk. The Arabs, whose chief occupation is pearl

164 diving, fishing, shipbuilding and wool-weaving, were ragged and unkempt; many had sores on their legs and arms, and appeared to be suffering from eye infections. Many of the children were

364 badly pock-marked. The stench of refuse, stale fish, camel dung and rotting food was unbearable, and attracted clouds of flies.

144 One noticed a variety of racial types. The Omani Arabs predominated, but one saw also fair-skinned Persians, Bedouins, Sunussi, and negroid types who were obviously ex-slaves. Many of the Arabs, thin-bearded men with hawk-like noses, looked more

• 443 villainous than any I have seen. We strolled through the bazaar, but the shops were small and untidy and displayed goods of inferior quality. In several of the shops I noticed ancient iron safes, gaudily painted, which were of English manufacture and had obviously

159 been taken from merchantmen by the pirates. There is little doubt that most of the inhabitants of Dera, a vicious, sullen crowd, would gladly have returned to piracy had they been given half a chance.

142 In contrast to their cruel, sardonic faces around us, I was struck by the beauty of some of the children who swarmed at our side, feeling our clothes and touching our hands. A little girl of nine or ten attracted my attention; her perfectly formed features, luminous brown eyes and Grecian lips made me sigh for a pencil and sketchbook. The little boys were delightful creatures too, with laughing eyes and white, even teeth.

363 The streets were extremely dark, with high walls on one side and palm-matting completely covering them like a roof, whilst

443 the 'road' was a quagmire of mud and camel dung. Six shops out of every ten exhibited panniers of dried fruits and cereals, figs,

## THE SAND KINGS OF OMAN

1143 [276] dates, ground nuts, spices and ghee butter. One shop was devoted entirely to hubble-bubble pipes and we watched an old Arab carving a pipe stem. The stems, which are of bamboo, are fitted with a brass ring near the top to form a lip for the smoker, the body of the stem being delicately covered with gold and silver thread. The second stem, through which the air escapes, is of plain bamboo, engraved with Arabic designs which are carved with a red-hot knife, and then coloured with indigo. The bowl, made of unglazed pottery, has a slender neck flared at the top. These pipes cost about ten rupees each, the stems being a rupee extra.

441 Some of the shops are well stocked with canned goods and haberdashery from the Indian market, and one saw shelves full of sewing cotton, buttons, metal polish, brass lamps, and cheap cloth. A common sight is raw cotton, still in its pods, which is gathered from trees in the interior; untreated hemp and tobacco leaves, crudely dried. There were few carpets, and those we saw were of indifferent quality. A few of the merchants appeared to be well-off and one or two had robes of coloured silk, edged with gold thread. They had noble, intelligent faces, and one patriarch, with a snow-white beard and spotless linen *abbas*, looked out of place in that ill-assorted crowd. A large sapphire ring sparkled on his finger and his long, thin hands were those of an artist. One 181 must be careful not to judge the Arab by Western standards, since dirt and insanitation are not abhorrent to them as they are to us. Even a cultured and fastidious Arab may have manners which would be out of place in a London drawing-room.

562 Apart from little girls up to ten years of age, we saw very few women, and they were heavily veiled. We walked to the little 396 quay, which was clustered with dhows and rowing boats and 501 watched the intense activity of shipbuilding and repairing that was in progress. The seams of the hulls are caulked with raw cotton and then covered with pitch, and the bottoms are painted with lime mixed with shark's oil, a good preservative. The upper part of the hull, above the water line, is also varnished with fish oil. Some of the sails are enormous and stretch from bows to stern, giving the dhows great speed on the water. This is necessary since they have to cover great distances, especially in the pearling season, when they may have to sail seventy miles in a single day to reach the beds.

501 There was quite a chilly breeze as we entered a ferryboat and were rowed across the creek, although the sun was still high above

## THE RUB-AL-KHALI

147

the horizon. It took about eight minutes to cross the creek, which is half a mile wide at this point, but the boats are heavy and clumsily made and the oars consist of rectangular boards nailed to a large pole. The boat was run on to the muddy, steep shore and we jumped out, picking our way amongst garbage and squatting Arabs. 501

The houses in Dubai Town, at the western and south side of the creek, are larger and more imposing than those in Dera; many of them have square towers and Persian ventilators, with verandas of Moorish design which lean dangerously away from the walls in cantilever fashion. The town is built upon the sides of a sloping hill, with a sandstone foundation, and the houses are curiously stepped or terraced; one walks along a road to find it is the roof of a house and, peering over the edge, sees another street below. The top of the hill is dominated by the sheikh's palace—a sandstone shell, no longer occupied, although the ruler's flag flies from the main tower. The Sheikh of Dubai lives in a walled house on the far side of the creek, overlooking the harbour and the sea. 342 361

The houses in the residential section of Dubai are large and clean, with high white walls and magnificent doorways of Moorish design. Some of the richer merchants' dwellings have small streets within their walls, with twisting alleys, steep flights of stone stairs and dark, cool rooms leading from the covered courtyards. One has the strange feeling in Dubai of being indoors all the time; this is because all the streets are roofed with palm-matting and one seldom sees the sky. It was rather like a visit to an Arab village at the British Exhibition in Wembley, except that this was the real thing, with all the aromas and colours of reality. Yet Dubai is remarkably clean for an Arab town, and some of the open booths and shops have first-class wares for sale. I have bought leather travelling bags here—made by native craftsmen—which were as handsome and well-made as anything at Fortnum & Mason's, and the Persian shops have stocks of modern and antique carpets which would please the most fastidious collector or decorator. 342 361 443

In one of the smaller houses on the highest terrace we found Mr. Jam Shan, the pearl merchant, who invited us into his dark and tiny sitting-room office. Both he and his sons wore shirts and trousers, smoked English cigarettes, and conversed in quite good Cockney, as they had spent many years in London. With the radio blaring an Indian song they sat bare-legged on the floor and resumed their work of sorting and counting the heap of pearls 441

## THE SAND KINGS OF OMAN

481 rose-pink downs and grass-covered depressions covered with the  
133 charming *zahr* plant. The going was difficult and no vehicle other than a jeep could have made it; in addition to the soft sand, there were sudden outcrops of exposed rock at the base of the sand-ridges, termed by the Arabs *shuqqa*, and on several occasions we were nearly hurled out of our seats by these obstructions.

361 After five hours of hard driving we reached the fringe of the  
609 large oasis of Baraimi, and left our car by a clump of palm trees while our guide went forward to spy out the lie of the land. He returned after an interval of fifteen minutes to report that he had  
[561] identified several notorious slave dealers of the Beni Quitab tribe, but could find no signs of a market or slaves. He advised us that the inhabitants were liable to be hostile, in spite of Sir Geoffrey's recent visit, and suggested that we should return as speedily as possible.

Schultz and I had no mind to go back without seeing something of the celebrated 'town', which is in reality a collection of mud huts and tents built around the wells, although there is a small fortified building and we saw one or two shops in the open bazaar; we therefore decided to ignore Abdul's fears. No sooner had we entered the oasis than we were surrounded by a curious crowd, all *Badus*, who insisted on following us to the bazaar.

[443] The bazaar was a temporary structure opened by migrant dealers for the sale of cheap cloths and foodstuffs, and there was little of interest for us to see. We looked around for the 'dungeon' in which slaves were reputed to be detained pending their sale, but beyond the small fort and one or two other coral buildings, could see nothing which resembled a prison. Among the crowd, however, we did notice several negroes whose legs bore the marks of iron chains and the healed scars of a lash, but they were quickly hurried out of sight at our approach and we were not allowed to  
609 question them. When we attempted to enter the door of the fort the crowd's attitude became threatening and for a moment I thought they would attack us.

At length the head Bedouin came forward and asked us what we wanted in Baraimi. We replied that we were friends of Sheikh Mohammed-bin Ali and had come to take photographs of the oasis. This appeared to satisfy him, but it was significant that we were not invited into any of the tents or asked to partake of coffee. Plainly, our presence was not desired, and when the headman coldly enquired whether it would not be advisable if we returned

●443

2: Codrai G-3 (1948-1950)1950 MKI Oman

361

[162]

Trucial Oman MK4



*The market-place at Dibai (a small British export area for less refined goods), where mingle both coastal and bedouin Arabs, Persians, Indians and Negroes.*

p.190(c)

T O

133

502

721

in two miles from their entrances. Thus it was that the pirate tribes were able to build their towns behind these natural booms, and to carry on their ruthless calling in defiance of the British and Portuguese navies — and to earn for their stronghold the much feared and romantic name, "The Pirate Coast".

T O

101

631

648

628

[527]

Trucial 'Oman, as it is called today, is ruled by six independent sheikhs, bound under old treaties with Britain to maintain a maritime truce for the prevention of piracy and slave-trading. Family feuds and inter-tribal quarrelling are as common among them as are the rusty, ancient cannon. Many of the latter are no doubt from British men-o'-war, and some are still used for ceremonial occasions, a party afterwards being despatched to retrieve the cannon-balls.

T O

361

504

439

Unspoiled by time, Sharjah is one of the principal little towns, but it lacks the enchantment of Dibai, a picturesque centre a few miles along the coast to the west. A wide, shallow inlet divides Dibai and its waterfront of quaint little coffee-houses, and provides anchorage for dhows that bring transhipped goods from other continents. In the large market-place, spread on either side of the inlet and connected by a ferry-service of numerous little pole-propelled craft, the bedouin, with his henna-dyed beard and ancient rifle, can be seen fingering everything that is on show, from modern radio sets to

T O

● 443

501

B

302

111

ladies' lingerie, but he has little use for some of the strange products of The West.

p. 191 (A)